



# Obituaries – A Family History Goldmine

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## Objectives

You will be able to:

- Understand the history, trends and value of using obituaries in genealogical research.
- Discern clues from an obituary that will lead to other historical sources.
- Discover valuable resources for newspaper research and indexes, utilize FamilySearch tools and identify relevant libraries to assist in uncovering an obituary.

## Introduction

- **History:** Obituaries began appearing more in the newspaper as printing equipment economized costs, though they were originally for prominent, wealthy, good standing citizens. After the Civil War their usage increased and are commonplace today.
- **Trends:** Obituaries are more likely to be found for residents in rural areas and small towns. They often illustrate social history fads.
- **Alternatives:** A death notice and card of thanks are two alternatives to an obituary.
- **Additional Value:** Obituaries are extremely valuable in instances where they were created before statewide vital record registration. They can also provide details on female lines.

## Extracting Valuable Genealogical Information

- **Names:** A variation of names can be listed, including a full name, maiden name, nickname, title and previous married name.
- **Family Genealogy:** Details about the deceased's family members are often stated, including their spouse-present and past, names of parents and other family members like siblings, aunts/uncles and nieces/nephews.
- **Birth:** A birth date and place are usually stated. This can be especially beneficial for an immigrant ancestor.
- **Places of Residence:** Migration patterns, immigration details and locations of residency are sometimes included.
- **Descendants:** Numerous descendants can be listed by name, including children-biological and step, deceased children and married names for daughters. The residence of posterity, number of children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren are often listed.
- **Death:** The date, age and cause of death are typical details that can be included.
- **Personal Character & Professional Accomplishments:** An individual's hobbies, civic contributions, volunteer activities, military service, political affiliation, occupation and educational background can be discussed.

- **Funeral Details & Religious Denomination:** Details regarding funeral arrangements, place of burial/cemetery, religious affiliation/church attended are sometimes specified.

## Locating an Obituary

### What You Need

- **Name of Deceased:** It is helpful to know the individual's maiden/married name, nickname, spouse, name abbreviations (optical character recognition) and names of other family members.
- **Approximate Death Date:** An obituary is typically printed within a few days of death and in the deceased's place of residence. For obituaries published in previous residences or a hometown, they can be printed several weeks or months later.
- **Approximate Death Place:** Narrowing the jurisdiction (city/town) will create a higher likelihood of success. Records to identify the last place of residence could be a death certificate, social security index entry, family sources, cemetery records or church records.

### Online Resources for Identifying Death Date and Place

- **United States Social Security Death Index:** This index begins in 1936 but is most beneficial for those who died after 1962.
- **Online death index databases:** DeathIndexes.com – This is a directory of websites with online death indexes, arranged by state and county.

### Obituary Indexes

- **Online:** Searchable Databases, Example – *California, San Joaquin, County Public Library Obituary Index, 1850-1991*, on FamilySearch.org
- **Published:** Printed Book, Example – *Index to 3000 Death Notices Covering Northwest Pennsylvania and Southwestern New York Extracted from the Corry Weekly Herald*, on FamilySearch.org

### Newspapers

- **Library of Congress:**
  1. *Chronicling America, Digitized Newspapers* – A project to digitize America's historic newspapers, 1789-1963.
  2. *U.S. Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present* – This website provides information about American newspapers and can be sorted by location and date.
- **Public Libraries:** A public and/or local library will often have copies (paper, microfilm, microfiche) of local newspapers. A helpful website to reference is [publiclibraries.com](http://publiclibraries.com).
- **Historical Societies:** They typically have newspapers for the local, state and regional area. Knowledgeable genealogists and librarians are typically on staff.
- **States:** States have online newspaper collections for periodicals in their jurisdiction and provide public access at no cost. A great website to reference is [digitalstatearchives.com](http://digitalstatearchives.com).
- **Universities & Colleges:** Many schools have newspaper collections that are digital and/or on microfilm. Example – UC Berkeley, <http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/libraries/newspaper-microform-library>
- **Online Resources:** These are the three largest subscription-based websites for digitized newspapers. They require a paid membership to use.
  1. *Newspapers.com*

2. [Genealogybank.com](http://Genealogybank.com)
3. [Newspaperarchive.com](http://Newspaperarchive.com)

**FamilySearch:** Numerous resources to identify obituaries can be found in the Historical Records Collections and Place Search category in the FamilySearch catalog.

### Historical Records Collections

[Records](#)
[Family Tree](#)
[Genealogies](#)
[Catalog](#)
[Books](#)
[Wiki](#)

**Filter by Collection Title**

Collection Title

☐ Show only collections with images

**Place**

- Africa 34
- Asia & Middle East 58
- Australia & New Zealand 42
- Canada 101
- Caribbean and Central America 72
- Continental Europe 607
- Mexico 66
- Other 8
- Pacific Islands 11
- South America 120
- United Kingdom and Ireland 156
- United States of America 1,221

## Historical Record Collections

Showing 1-100 of 2,496 Collections.

Title ▲	Records	Last Updated
Alabama Births and Christenings, 1881-1930	6,830	Mar 12, 2012
Alabama Civil War Service Records of Confederate Soldiers, 1861-1865	1,213,534	Apr 20, 2012
Alabama Civil War Service Records of Union Soldiers, 1861-1865	31,582	Apr 20, 2012
Alabama County Marriages, 1809-1950	5,935,455	Nov 28, 2018
Alabama County Marriages, 1818-1936	80,469	Jan 24, 2017
Alabama Deaths and Burials, 1881-1952	105,683	Feb 25, 2013
Alabama Deaths, 1908-1974	1,875,638	Nov 21, 2018
Alabama Estate Files, 1830-1976	25,297	Dec 11, 2013
Alabama Marriages, 1816-1957	1,338,311	Jul 21, 2015
Alabama Probate Records, 1809-1985	<a href="#">Browse Images</a>	Feb 19, 2013

### Place Search

#### Search by:

Place | [Surnames](#) | [Titles](#) | [Author](#) | [Subjects](#) | [Keywords](#)

Place

#### Search for:

[Call Number](#) | [Film/Fiche Number](#)

#### Availability

- ☒ Any
- ☐ Online
- ☐ Family History Center

[Search](#)

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**Uncommon Sources:** Other sources that can list an obituary are alumni magazines, church newsletters, professional employment publications, ethnic newspapers, family associations and the publications of historical/genealogical societies (see PERSI for indexing of periodicals).

**Alternative Sources:** Mortuaries can publish memorials and obituaries online. More recent deaths often have an obituary posted online. Example – *Legacy.com*

## The Negatives

- Not everything printed is true.
- Obituaries are secondary sources.
- Big city newspapers often did not include obituaries for many residents.
- Do not just use the abstract, look up the original obituary.

## Online Resources

- **FamilySearch Catalog:** <https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog/search/>
- **FamilySearch Wiki:** [https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main\\_Page](https://www.familysearch.org/wiki/en/Main_Page)
- **United States Social Security Death Index:**  
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1202535>
- **Death Indexes:** <https://www.deathindexes.com/>
- **Library of Congress – Chronicling America:** <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>
- **Library of Congress – US Newspaper Directory, 1690-Present:**  
<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>
- **PublicLibraries.com:** <https://publiclibraries.com/>
- **Digital State Archives:** <http://www.digitalstatearchives.com/>
- **Newspapers.com:** <https://www.newspapers.com/>
- **Genealogybank.com:** <https://www.genealogybank.com/>
- **Newspaperarchive.com:** <https://newspaperarchive.com/>
- **Legacy.com:** <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/local>
- **PERSI (Periodical Source Index):** PERSI is searchable at <https://www.findmypast.com/>
- **Age calculator:** <https://www.calculator.net/age-calculator.html>

